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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the results of and the response to a seminar in black-Jewish relations which was offered to a group of Jewish youth in a major, urban, conservative synagogue. A pre and post seminar instrument was administered to measure various dimensions of social attitudes, level of socio-cultural and ritual identification with Judaism and the Jewish community, social distance perceptions, and racial attitudes. The seminar experience was composed of twelve two-hour sessions. The staff included two Jewish males, a black male, a Jewish female, and a black female. Readings were assigned and discussions were focused on the experiences of the black and Jewish communities in America, the history of black-Jewish relations, differing black and Jewish perceptions, and specific issues such as the Middle East situation, the civil rights movement and black power, and the New York City school crisis. The pre and post seminar scores of the participants' racial attitudes provide evidence which supports the hypothesis of positive change. Though the study was initially designed to measure changes in the racial attitudes of seminar participants, the study itself, as well as the seminar content and the seminar leaders, became objects of controversy. This paper includes an analysis of the congregational leadership's reaction to the program. It is suggested that the pseudo-scientific, pseudo-objective, and fundamentally self-protective response exhibited typifies the reactions of Jewish communal leadership to certain aspects of Jewish-black relations. (Author/AM)

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A CASE STUDY IN BLACK-JEWISH RELATIONS

or

"The Only Thing Wrong With Jews Is That They Just Ain't Jewish Enough"*

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Presented at

The Southern Sociological Society Meeting

March 1977

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by

Howard Fishman

and

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*Quoted by Grier and Cobbs (1972:125).

Introduction

OCT 18 1977

This paper examines the results of and the response to a seminar in Black-Jewish relations which was offered to a group of Jewish youth in a major, urban, Conservative synagogue. Though the study was initially designed to measure changes in the racial attitudes of seminar participants, the study itself as well as the seminar content and the seminar leaders, became objects of controversy. This paper will include, therefore, an analysis of the congregational leadership's posture. We will suggest that the pseudo-scientific, pseudo-objective, and fundamentally self-protective response exhibited in this instance typifies the reactions of Jewish communal leadership to certain aspects of Jewish-Black relations.

In an earlier paper, the authors suggested that the widespread disaffection of Jewish youth is largely a product of the Jewish establishment's propensity for reconstructing reality according to its own specifications (Fishman and Fishman, 1976). In this study, too, the authors encountered an almost obsessive concern on the part of Jewish leadership with creating and perpetuating myths. These include, but are certainly not limited to, the notion that all Jews are (and have always been) totally committed to assuring equality for Blacks and that the only problem in the relationship between Blacks and Jews is the anti-Semitism exhibited by some Blacks.

Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical orientation derives from the writings of several authorities in the field of social psychology. Westie (1964:579) notes that there is growing recognition among sociologists that "no special theories of prejudice, discrimination, or intergroup relations are necessary to the understanding of these phenomena. ... The relations between racial and ethnic groups do not differ basically from human relations in general. ... Many of the (social and psychological) processes which operate very subtly in other social situations become naked and obvious in the realm of minority-majority relations. ..."

Accordingly, in the following analysis we will draw heavily from the various principles and views articulated in the social-psychological tradition of interactionism. We begin with the phenomenological position of W.I. Thomas: "A situation defined as real is real in its consequences." When applied to intergroup relations, this seemingly simple statement translates into a web spun from multiple group and/or individual definitions of reality. Thus, the issue of any "absolute reality" or "factual reality" becomes increasingly difficult to extricate or unravel. In fact, as Westie (1964:580) observes, "interactions between groupings the world over are shaped by believed differences which do not exist."

Where, then, does the individual's definition of reality, including beliefs, attitudes, feelings about one's own group and other groups, and proper intergroup relations, come from? Blumer (1969:2) suggests that:

1. Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them.
2. The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of the social interaction that one has with one's fellows.
3. Meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters.

This theoretical orientation is not greatly dissimilar from the normative theory of prejudice which asserts that "individuals are prejudiced because they are raised in societies which have prejudice as a facet of the normative systems of their culture. Prejudice is built into the culture in the form of normative precepts - that is, notions of "ought to be" - which define the ways in which members of the group ought to behave in relation to the members of selected outgroups" (Westie, 1964:583-584). However, as interactionists, symbolic and otherwise, are wont to note, it is Blumer's premise #3 and similar statements which truly distinguish the interactionist approach from the overstatement of social-cultural determinism. Moreover, it is precisely such statements which allow for individual variation within social-cultural groupings.

The interactionist approach also eliminates the false dichotomy between individual and society and, thus, the bogus distinction between the sociological theory of prejudice (the normative theory) and the psychological theory in which prejudice is described as a characteristic of a particular personality type. In the interactionist approach, an individual's beliefs about and attitudes toward all objects (including objects as diverse as self, and minority- or outgroups) are part of one's self-system. They are acquired through interaction and are sustained or modified through the individual's ongoing experiences.

It is this acute awareness of individual capacity to modify group meanings and the definitions of reality given to youth by significant others (parents, peers, etc.) that formed the "theoretical" rationale of the seminar experience described in this paper. In fact, it became increasingly apparent during the course of the seminar that the participants had been accustomed to viewing the issue of Black-Jewish relations in black and white (or, more appropriately, Black and Jewish) terms. Particular emphasis was placed by the staff, therefore, on "validating" multiple perspectives and acknowledging the absence of definitive "answers."

Problem Statement and Background

In the case of Jewish-Black relations, we are dealing with interaction between two classic minority groups which have been objects of prejudice and discrimination by "majority American culture." However, it is clear that each group has developed its own unique mind-set, based on historic experience and cultural values, regarding the "reality" of American society. Of particular interest in this regard are the reciprocal perceptions and expectations which each has developed toward the other.

Historically, the Jewish community has espoused and, for the most part, has lived by the ethical standards of "equality" and "respect for individual worth and dignity." A corollary to this philosophic posture has been a commitment to social activism on behalf of social victims in general and, in particular, on behalf of minorities.

From the very beginning of the civil rights movement, Jewish activists played a significant role. Jewish youth and adults, in disproportionate numbers, allied themselves with Black leaders in the battle against racism.

The '60s and '70s introduced some critical changes into the relationships between Blacks and Jews. In part, it became increasingly clear that the two communities were not monoliths. Undeniable evidence of Jewish racism and Black anti-Semitism came to the fore. It was suddenly apparent that substantial segments of both communities held unsuspected attitudes which threatened the future of the alliance.

Jewish leaders, in awed and hushed tones, proclaimed the existence of a crisis in Jewish-Black relations. Their pronouncements, however, extended only to the question of Black anti-Semitism. With rare exceptions, they decried the betrayal and ingratitude of the Black community. To make matters worse, the civil rights movement began to

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be transformed into the Black Power movement. According to Nathan Wright (1971:131-133), in fact, the very emergence of the Black Power movement reflected "the failure of the civil rights movement in at least several significant respects. ... Black people manifestly must have the sense of pride and self-respect which can only come through the tradition of self-directed efforts at self-sufficiency. ... Integration, as we have sought to work it out over the past decade and more, has clearly failed. There can be no meaningful integration between unequals. Thus, as Black men have turned toward an illusive integrationist goal, with white men holding the reins of power, Black men have lost both their identity and their self-respect."

Jews were hurt, angry, and resentful at being invited out of leadership roles. Some even became reactionary as a result of urban riots, employment quotas and competition in the marketplace, Black attempts at residential integration and community control of schools, and the identification of some segments of the Black community with anti-Israel sentiments. Most significant for our purposes, however, was the adamant refusal of Jewish leadership to even acknowledge Jewish racism and its concomitant effort to sustain the myth of spotless liberalism. Fein (1969:12-13) has addressed this point by noting that "the dirty little secret of our community, after all, is that its leaders have always spoken more forcefully and more radically than its followers have felt. We have pushed and pulled, we have prodded and cajoled, and, failing all else, we have spoken our mind even when we knew our people were recalcitrant. And now we are confused, diverted, uneasy; now the intense anti-racist pressure which has

been so central a part of the behavior of Jewish leadership over the years has been relaxed, and, as the pressure has relaxed, the latent bigotry has bubbled up."

Even as early as 1945, Berson (1971:110) notes, there were singular Jewish leaders who "said loudly what most Jews are still only whispering: 'that some manifestations of anti-Semitism cannot be eliminated by the enactment of or repeal of laws or the endeavors of social psychologists. When the Negro population of Harlem is exploited by a group of Jewish landlords, no group libel statute, no public relations program, and no community interrelations seminar will eradicate anti-Semitism in that area. The Harlem situation yields profits to a microscopic minority of Jews, but it throws a dark shadow upon the vast network of Negro-Jewish relations.'"

The Black attitude toward the Jewish community is rife with ambivalence. Blacks tend to view Jews as whites and, thus, as part of the oppressive system of slavery and discrimination which they have endured. That some Jews have championed the cause of civil rights has been offset by the actions of Jews as employers of Black domestics, as slum landlords, as small businessmen in ghetto areas, and as competitors in a tight and tightening job market. Whereas Israel seems to have the support of "white America" in its struggle in the Middle East, many American Blacks have seen their destiny as linked with the fortunes and struggles of colored peoples throughout the world. Affirmative action and the quota system, which many Jews perceived as operating against their interests, appeared to Blacks to be the only way to gain a foothold in an inhospitable system.

Lomax captures the ambivalence of the Black mind-set in his classic work, The Negro Revolt. He quotes (Lomax, 1971:200) from James Baldwin's essay, "The Harlem Ghetto:" "Just as a society must have a scapegoat, so hatred must have a symbol. Georgia has the Negro and Harlem has the Jew." Lomax argues that "Baldwin's analysis is valid far beyond the boundaries of Harlem." He asserts that anti-Semitism may be on the rise among Negroes, but that this phenomenon is due to more than the presence of Jews as merchants and bill collectors in the bedeviled Negro ghettos. Lomax suggests that while individual Jews have been "our closest allies" (naming specifically Arthur Spingarn, Jack Greenberg, Harry Golden, Kivie Kaplan), not all Jews everywhere have championed the Negro cause.

He cites (1971:200-201) the findings of a 1959 study of suburban integration: "Of all the ethnic suburban ghettos, the study concluded, the Jewish communities were the most adamant about keeping Negroes out. Jewishness, not prejudice, is the explanation for this. Jews in these gilt-edged ghettos opposed integration not because they hated or discriminated against Negroes; rather they were seeking to realize that element in their tradition which calls for togetherness." Negroes, nonetheless, have a difficult time accepting such logic, because they "expect Jews to 'know better' because they, too, have suffered" (Lomax, 1971:200).

The conflicts and contradictions between the Black and Jewish definitions of reality are particularly well underscored by Lomax in the following:

... in many areas of the non-South we find ourselves discriminated against in employment, not because we are Negroes but because we are gentiles. The same thing happens when we go to seek housing and recreational outlets. ... The motivation of the Negro individual ... is to get the hell out of the Negro ghetto, be it

physical or mental, as soon as he can. The conformist Jew, on the other hand, is motivated in precisely the opposite direction (Lomax, 1971:202).

Grier and Cobbs quote perhaps the perfect illustration of Black ambivalence toward the Jewish community. They cite (1972:125) the observation of a Black laborer to the effect that "The only thing wrong with Jews is that they just ain't Jewish enough."

It is the position of the authors that the problematic aspects of Jewish-Black relations have been exacerbated by negligence and unfounded assumptions. In short, the Jewish community has taken its own liberalism for granted and has failed to reinforce, both through education and example, its traditional heritage. Moreover, it has denied to another group of human beings the legitimacy of their definition of reality. To do so, however incorrect one may think the other's definition to be or however divergent it is from one's own definition, is to deny the other's integrity.

A program designed to address these concerns was developed under the auspices of a Religious School with which one of the authors was affiliated. The purpose of this Seminar in Black-Jewish Relations was to present the different constructions of reality adopted by the Black and Jewish communities and to provide insight into the dynamics which created and perpetuate them. Some theoretical underpinnings from the field of social psychology will be introduced to both validate the educational experience and provide a framework for analysis.

Study Design and Hypothesis

A. Purpose

The purpose of the study was to assess the impact of a Seminar on the racial attitudes of participants. A pre- and post-seminar instrument was administered to measure various dimensions of social attitudes, level of socio-cultural and ritual identification with Judaism and the Jewish community, social distance perceptions, and racial attitudes. In addition, students were asked to indicate why they had enrolled in the course and what they had gained from the experience.

B. Population

Thirty-one high school students affiliated with the Youth Program of a Conservative synagogue were invited to participate in a Seminar on Black-Jewish Relations.

C. Independent Variable

The seminar experience was composed of twelve two-hour sessions. It was conducted under the joint auspices of the congregational Religious School and the Extension Service of a local educational institution. The sessions were jointly led by representatives of both agencies. The staff included two Jewish males, a Black male, a Jewish female, and a Black female. In addition, various Jewish and Black guests were invited to participate. Although unplanned, the seminar was "observed" on almost every occasion by a member of the synagogue's hierarchy (Chairman of the School Board, Chairman of the Curriculum Committee, Senior Rabbi, Associate Rabbi) and representatives of other Jewish organizations (Anti-Defamation League, B'nai B'rith Youth Organization).

Readings were assigned and discussions were focused on the experiences of the Black and Jewish communities in America, the history of Black-Jewish relations, differing Black and Jewish perceptions, and specific issues such as the Middle East situation, the civil rights movement and Black Power, and the New York City school crisis.

D. Dependent Variable

Racial attitudes were measured by means of the fifteen Likert-type items in Section Three of the questionnaire.

E. Hypothesis

The experience of a seminar in Intergroup Education (Black-Jewish Relations) will effect positive changes in the racial attitudes of the participants.

Findings

The pre- and post-seminar scores of the participants' racial attitudes provide evidence which supports the hypothesis of positive change.

Pre-seminar scores ranged from 8 to 43. (The total possible range was from -45, most negative attitudes, to 45, most positive attitudes.)

The Mean Score was 26.8. As indicated in Table 1, 9 students (29%) initially fell into the Low Positive category, 16 (51.6%) were in the Moderate Positive category, and 6 (19.4%) were in the High Positive category.

Table 1. PRE-SEMINAR SCORES

Degree Of Positive Feelings	Number	Percent
Low (0-16)	9	29
Moderate (17-31)	16	51.6
High (32-45)	6	19.4

Positive change is revealed in the post-seminar scores of 25 (80.6%) of the participants. The amount of positive change ranges from 1 to 7, with a mean of 3. Only 6 (19.4%) of the participants changed in a negative direction. The amount of this change varied from 1 to 13, with a mean of four. Post-seminar scores are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. POST-SEMINAR SCORES

Degree of Positive Feelings	Number	Percent
Low (0-16)	6	19.4
Moderate (17-31)	13	41.9
High (32-45)	12	38.7

The range has moved in a more positive direction, 13 to 45, as has the mean score, now 28.4. The proportions of students in the low and moderate categories have decreased from 29% to 19.4% and from 51.6% to 41.9%, respectively. The proportion in the high category has increased from 19.4% to 38.7%.

Discussion and Conclusions

These results may seem astoundingly positive and promising, but a caveat is in order. It should be noted that the participants are hardly typical. They are a select group of Jewish young people who were invited to participate in the seminar because of their maturity, sensitivity, and the judgement that they would be receptive to or at least able to deal in a meaningful fashion with the material. In addition, since the seminar was an extra-curricular offering, participation was purely voluntary. Thus, it was of no great surprise

that all of these young people had pre-seminar scores which were positive.

The fact that the vast majority became even more positively oriented toward Blacks as a result of the seminar experience is also at least partially explainable in "non-content" terms. It is likely that these results reflect an intense identification with the seminar leaders who were being harrassed by the congregational leadership . On one occasion, when the Black male staff person was being baited by a reknowned nationally spokesman for A.D.L., a young lady not generally known for being aggressive or foul-mouthed suggested: "Why don't you stop being a shmuck and get off his back. If you'd only listen to what he's saying, you might learn something important."

The students themselves obviously recognized the need for greater knowledge and awareness of the experience of the Black community and of Black-Jewish relations. One student wrote:

"I feel very inadequate in my understanding of Black-Jewish relations. I would like to become more comfortable with my associations with Blacks.

Another participant gave the following reason for becoming involved:

"I am vaguely aware of a growing problem in Jewish-Black relations in the U.S. Knowing relatively little about the details of the situation, I thought the course would be a good start in learning more about them."

Still another student expressed his objectives somewhat differently:

"I am taking this course because most of my life has been sheltered from the blacks and black culture. What I've heard has mainly been propoganda and I'm ready for some fact. I would like to gain two things: a better understanding of blacks and their feelings toward Jews, and to find out how I can better relations."

Perhaps even more astounding than the excitement and positive change which the seminar evoked in this special group of young Jews was the heated controversy, hostility and fear which it evoked from the congregational and communal leadership. As noted above, virtually every session was attended by one or more members of the congregational hierarchy or representatives of Jewish communal organizations invited by the hierarchy to observe and evaluate the seminar.

Extensive debate, both within formal meetings and in hallways, and a great deal of correspondence was addressed to the issues raised by the very existence of the seminar. Four documents have been selected to portray the positions taken by various interested parties:

Document A. Progress Report of Staff Member (prepared after 6th session).

The course is forcing the _____ community to face the issues involved between the Black and Jewish communities. The facing of the issue is generating acute anxiety among the adult membership who project their anxiety, guilt and the fragility of their self-esteem onto their children. This pain causes a good deal of ambivalence concerning the program. On the one hand the problem is there, but there is a feeling that it must be cleansed and talked about politely and in ways not designed to elicit discomfort. ... It is much pleasanter to avoid the data. But the problem exists and there is guilt.

Additionally, the teenagers are excited by the course and can handle the anxiety. They show up, participate, debate and are provoked to research and self-examination.

In short, the congregation establishment is disturbed, would probably like to avoid the program but cannot and probably will not because they know it is needed. This is the result the Director of Education wanted.

Document B. Letter of Commendation from a Black-Jewish Guest

I am sending this letter in order that I might go on record as a firm supporter of the brief but substantive sessions that are now taking place under the auspices of the _____ Congregation and the _____ Institute.

As a member of the Board of the Jewish Community Center, I think it important that Jewish kids engage in the type of activity cited above. As a member of the Black race and also a Jew, I found the session I attended on May 30th to be most constructive and educationally beneficial to both myself and the students.

It is my strong belief that these sessions should be continued as they are beneficial to the _____ community generally and the Black and Jewish communities specifically.

Document C. Letter of Senior Rabbi to Chairman of School Board

On the basis of my listening to the tape of one session of the seminar on Black-Jewish relations and attending two of its sessions, I have come to the conclusion that despite the positive effects of this enterprise, its uniqueness and stimulation, it would be inadvisable to continue this seminar or any further co-sponsorship of any other seminar with the _____ Institute next year.

My reason is that the course fails to meet the purposes of its prospectus. It is not a course of studies because the speakers at the course are unqualified to discuss the total subject. They speak from the limited point of view of their personal perspective, and have made statements which are clearly subject to challenge as to their accuracy.

It fails as an encounter session because it pits teenagers against people who are at least ten years their senior. It is not a study in black-Jewish relations but an opportunity for our young people to encounter the perspective of one or two blacks who speak from the point of view of their personal perception and who have generalized from their personal experiences.

Our young people clearly identify with the speakers. The shock of the encounter may lead them to do some reading and to think more profoundly, but it fails to impart objective information or valid measurable data.

The continuation of this course would require constant supervision and needless conflict. I do not believe that the principals who are presently associated with this seminar series should be employed as members of our staff.— This is not to imply that they are now; it is to negate that possibility in the future.

If there is a need for such a course, it ought to be established on a more objective basis with speakers from varying points of view involved. As it is, I find it painfully one-sided and questionable.

Document D. Post-Seminar Observations of a Participant

YES, by all means continue this seminar. Too many people are too ignorant about things going on about them. We can't run and hide so that maybe those nasty things will disappear, and that's what many people do. As an educational institution, the synagogue should make people aware and should present its students with rounded facts and opinions instead of the usual slanted propaganda.

Most adults give us very little credit for our mental capacities. (My brain may be little, relatively speaking, but I can still think.) I've heard that some of the "older generation" think that a seminar like this could do so much to a "child's" mind as to go even so far as to ruin a home life. If a home life can be that easily destroyed it wasn't so good to begin with. It was also brought up that we poor children were likely to become brainwashed by these intruders who love teaching us "bad facts." HOGWASH!!! We all have the ability to sift through information given to us to determine for ourselves what we believe to be true. At this stage of the game we know that teachers are not infallible and we are not going to be that easily overcome by them. It must be recognized that we need that information though and desperately. We can digest it and figure out what is to be done with it - if anything. The questions you raised couldn't really determine if I benefited from the course - only my saying so can. I benefited from this course and I am sure everyone else got a lot out of it too. Only you can't put a tangible measurement on it -- that's all. It would be a real shame to see this discontinued.

Oh yes, before I end - Thank you. At least I got the chance to learn a lot and experience a lot from this seminar. I've grown a bit because of it.

The fate of the seminar was finally decided at a congregational School Board meeting. With one exception (who happened to be Chairman of the School Board and an aspiring 'macher'), the parents of the participants enthusiastically lauded the program. Without exception, the 'elders' and rabbinical staff as well as the representatives of the national organizations lambasted it. In a close vote it was determined that the re-offering of the seminar would be left to the discretion of the Director of Education. The Senior Rabbi suggested at the time that the vote represented a Pyrrhic victory. Indeed, the seminar was not offered again and the Director of Education is no longer affiliated with the congregation.

Another postscript is worthy of mention. Several months after the conclusion of the seminar, the following statement appeared in the proceedings of the House of Representatives of the United States. It represents, to the best of our knowledge, the only occasion on which a specific Jewish education course was endorsed in the Congressional Record:

Hon. Walter E. Fauntroy

Mr. Speaker, I am most gratified to learn of an educational program ... The basic purpose of this educational process is to sensitize our young people to the common issues which confront the black and Jewish communities. Participants in the program become involved in seminar presentation, dialog, and experimental group dynamics, while studying related reading materials. ... The awareness that results influences their choices of behavior and the parameters of social responsibility.

That this program has been such a success must be attributed to the enormous sensitivity, concern, and competence evidenced by the staff people ...

We live in a society based on group identity in which the activities of one group affect the life conditions of the other. The dire need for mutual understanding is therefore evident; the possibility of progress and change exists only when myths are exploded and the issues candidly explored. I believe this program represents an important educational innovation and breakthrough in establishing a critical channel of communication. I am convinced it will accrue benefits not only for those directly involved but to all who live in the community.

It would appear to the authors that the congregational leadership in question provided an accurate illustration of the type of behavior indicted by Fein (1969:13): "Just at the time when courageous leadership was most wanted, it has been most wanting. By pursuing diversion, we have sanctioned bigotry."

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